

## WHEN CYBERBULLIES ARE GIRLS: A SURVEY WITH ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

New technologies have led to increased use of digital devices and a consequent risk of negative experiences in the online world, for example cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a widespread phenomenon among adolescents and the majority of studies have identified males as the main perpetrators. However, girls may also be perpetrators of similar episodes, although their actions or motivations may be different from those of boys. Aiming to fill this gap in the literature, the current study consists of an exploratory investigation aimed at getting to know the cyberbullying girl from the adolescents' point of view. Middle and high school students (N = 927) completed a questionnaire about the characteristics of adolescents who engage in cyberbullying. They answered 15 open-ended questions about the interests, clothing, feelings and habits of cyberbullying girls. The content of each question was analysed and grouped into categories. Frequencies and percentages were calculated and discussed with the class groups involved in the research project. From the adolescents' representations, the cyberbullying girl seems to be a girl who uses a fake nickname to surf online (Instagram, 29.9%), does not have a specific outfit (42.6%) and follows a Mediterranean diet (28.9%), although she also eats fast food (26.3%). She watches violent series (31.8%) and have specific music tastes (52.6%). According to the participants, the girl cyberbully enjoys aggressive behaviour (61.3%), although she is afraid of situations that may challenge her (57.3%). Negative (31.6%) or popular (34.2%) people are seen as her role models. The class discussions support the results of the questionnaire and were useful to deepen the findings: the students revealed that the cyberbully girl eats dietetic food because she needs to be beautiful to be powerful, or that her aggressive behaviour is indirect, i.e. she uses the social network to spread gossip.

**Keywords:** *Cyberbullying, cyberbullying girl, adolescents, school, education.*

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### 1. Introduction

The widespread use of digital technologies has contributed to the emergence of cyberbullying, a form of aggression carried out through electronic devices and characterized by repeated hostile actions intended to cause harm (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying often results in more severe consequences for adolescents' mental and physical health, including elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. A recent systematic review by Kasturiratna et al. (2025), encompassing 56 meta-analyses, identified females, school-aged youth, victims of traditional bullying, and frequent internet users as particularly vulnerable populations. Cyberbullying victimization is associated with detrimental psychological outcomes, lower academic achievement, and maladaptive coping strategies, although recent intervention programs have demonstrated encouraging results (Sorrentino et al., 2018).

In Italy, recent data point to a concerning rise in cyberbullying among adolescents. According to the ESPAD@Italia 2024 survey (CNR-IFC, 2024), over 1 million students aged 15 to 19 (47%) reported having been victims of cyberbullying in 2024 and approximately 800,000 students (32%) admitted to perpetrating cyberbullying, with higher rates among boys (35%) compared to girls (29%). Alarmingly, nearly one in four students (23%) reported occupying both roles - victim and perpetrator - a condition linked to more serious consequences, including interpersonal difficulties and engagement in risky behaviors. Gender trends have also shifted: while girls reported higher victimization rates in previous years (2021–2023), in 2024 boys surpassed girls in victimization prevalence. Insulting messages in group chats remain the most frequent form of cyberbullying, with boys engaging more often in direct threats and public insults on social media, and girls more frequently involved in indirect forms, such as online exclusion and unauthorized sharing of personal content (CNR-IFC, 2024).

Although the literature generally indicates that boys are more often the perpetrators of cyberbullying (Calmaestra et al., 2020; Horzum et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017), some evidence suggests that girls also engage in cyberbullying behaviours (Khurana et al., 2015; Ibrahim & Vi, 2021), despite with a different form. According to findings by Saladino et al. (2020), male cyberbullies are more likely to engage

in behaviours such as insults, misinformation dissemination, and data theft, whereas female cyberbullies tend to exploit interpersonal trust to extract and later disclose personal information, or to socially exclude others from online groups and games. This kind of behaviour represent an indirect form of aggression (Underwood, 2003), that are more prevalent among girls than boys (Eisenberg et al., 1994). A research conducted among Italian adolescents highlights girls' involvement in relational bullying, supporting a parallel between traditional indirect aggression and certain forms of cyberbullying (De Vita & Burgio, 2023). Furthermore, this kind of aggression can be amplified in online environments, where anonymity and physical distance lower the barriers to aggression (Buzgon et al., 2022).

Based on these considerations, the present study has the purpose to investigate the role of girls as primary perpetrators of cyberbullying behaviours. Specifically, by directly involving adolescents in the action-research process, this specific project has the aim (1) to increase adolescents' awareness about the topic, which also represent preventive strategies (Saladino et al., 2020), and (2) to understand the underlying mechanisms and behavioural patterns associated with female cyberbullying.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

This study is part of a bigger research project that involved 47 lower and upper secondary school classes from the provinces of Ancona, Fermo, Macerata, and Pesaro-Urbino. A total of 927 students participated in the study, including 473 boys and 452 girls ( $M_{age} = 14.96$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

**2.2.1. Questionnaire.** After some queries about demographic information, such as year of birth and gender, participants provided their answers to the following 15 open-ended questions: What could be her nickname? How do you think she dresses? What kind of clothing does she prefer? What accessories? What does she eat? What online series does she follow? What music does she listen to? What sport does she play? What male friends does she hang out with? What female friends does she hang out with? What social networks does she use? What makes her laugh? What annoys her? What is she afraid of? What is she attracted to? What are the role models she looks up to? What words does she most often use?

**2.2.2. Class discussion.** After analyzing the questionnaire responses, the research team carried out feedback and discussions in the involved classes. In this phase, the results were presented and discussed, either in person or remotely, depending on the various stages of the ongoing pandemic during the research period. Presenting the results to the students who took part in the study allowed, on one hand, for an awareness-raising activity, and on the other, for a deeper analysis of the data collected from the overall questionnaire responses.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The content of each question was analysed and grouped into categories. Frequencies and percentages were calculated using SPSS and then discussed with the research class groups involved.

## 3. Results

The collected data highlight various aspects of the characteristics and behaviours associated with the phenomenon of female cyberbullying, as reflected in the responses of the participants. Regarding nicknames, 67.2% of respondents indicated the use of a nickname as a form of victim identification, with examples such as "Bella" (Table 1). In terms of clothing, the majority of respondents described the victim as dressing "normally" or "like others" (42.6%), while 32.5% indicated the use of sportswear. The victim's diet was predominantly described as healthy and typical of the "Mediterranean diet" (28.9%), with 26.3% indicating a diet characterized by fast food or ready-made foods (Table 1).

Table 1.

	N	%		N	%		N	%
<b>What nickname could she have?</b>			<b>How does she dress</b>			<b>What does she eat?</b>		
Nickname	623	67.2	Generic	395	42.6	Mediterranean cuisine	268	28.9
Real name (first and/or last name)	194	20.0	Sportswear	301	32.5	Fast food/ready-made/unhealthy food	244	26.3
I don't know	11	1.2	Branded clothing	127	13.7	Generic	238	25.7
Not applicable	76	8.2	Not applicable	77	8.3	Ethnic cuisine	24	2.6
No response	23	2.5	No response	23	2.5	Mixed	23	2.5
						Not applicable	100	10.8
						No response	30	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>

Regarding her interests (Table 2), participants said that they watched series with themes of violence, drugs, or action, such as "Suburra" (31.8%), listened Trap, Rap or Pop music (52.6%), practice individual sports (38.4%) or no one (27%).

Table 2.

	N	%		N	%		N	%
<b>What TV series does she watch online?</b>			<b>What music does she listen to?</b>			<b>What sports does she practice?</b>		
Drugs/violence/robbery/action	295	31.8	Specific genre of music	488	52.6	Individual sport	356	38.4
Romantic/comedy	166	17.9	Multiple genres of music	261	28.2	None	250	27.0
Horror/sci-fi/fantasy	127	13.7	Not applicable	146	15.7	Team sport	205	22.1
Mixed (multiple genres)	60	6.5	No response	33	3.5	Not applicable	71	7.8
Cartoons	32	3.5						
None	3	0.3						
Not applicable	187	20.2						
No response	57	6.1						
<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>

Male friendship was with boys involved in crime or violence (33.3%) or with people of similar status (23.2%), whereas female friendships were with popular friends (26.6%). See Table 3.

Table 3.

	N	%		N	%
<b>What male friends does she hang out with?</b>			<b>What female friends does she hang out with?</b>		
Drugs/crime/violence	309	33.3	Similar (same status)	277	29.8
Similar (same status)	215	23.2	Older, wealthier, more popular	82	8.8
Older, wealthier, more popular	147	15.9	Younger, less wealthy, less popular	43	4.6
Younger, less wealthy, less popular	18	1.9	Drugs/crime/violence	247	26.6
None/few	92	9.9	None/few	94	10.1
Calm	18	1.9	Beautiful	27	2.9
Not applicable	96	10.4	Calm	20	2.2
No response	32	3.5	Not applicable	101	10.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>

According to the participants (see Table 4 and Table 5), cyberbullying girls, who seem to prefer the use of multiple platform (54.4%) or Instagram (29.9%), enjoy aggression to their person victims (61.3%), probably for the fear to situation in which their role is questioned (57.3%) or to be excluded or hurt (41.6%).

Table 4.

	N	%		N	%		N	%
<b>What social networks does she use?</b>			<b>What entertains her?</b>			<b>What disturbs her?</b>		
Generic	504	54.4	Aggressiveness towards others	568	61.3	Situations/people that challenge her	531	57.3
Instagram	277	29.9	Healthy activities	138	14.9	Personal/family and relationship issues	78	8.4
TikTok	46	5.0	Unhealthy activities	41	4.4	Diversity	31	3.3
Porn/darkweb	9	1.0	Online activities	25	2.7	Nothing	26	2.8
None	2	0.2	Not applicable	119	12.8	Not applicable	223	24.1
Not applicable	56	6.0	No response	36	3.9	No response	38	4.1
No response	33	3.6						
<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100</b>

They seem to be attracted in doing negative behaviours (22.5%) and relationships with potential partner (32.7%). Her role models reflect individuals who are popular (34.2%) or have negative traits (31.6%), and the language used by the victim is often described as aggressive, characterized by insults and swear words (67,2%). See Table 5 and Table 6 for more details.

During the class discussion, the students showed a tendency to associate and overlap the behaviour of a bully with that of a cyberbully. Above all, they emphasise her physical characteristics, pointing to her as a beautiful girl who dresses fashionably and, not infrequently, provocatively. This allows her to subject boys to her will and to have girls in her retinue who, in order to be her friend, try to please her. Focusing on what a cyberbully's behaviour can be, the students highlight how she tends to denigrate the people she targets through repeated insults, mainly related to physical appearance or particular frailties she has become aware of: hers is exclusively a psychological violence. Despite the fact that the questionnaires show how the cyberbully tends to hide her identity behind a nickname, there is a tendency in the classroom to think that she is not afraid to show herself and when she wants to attack someone she does so openly. Many of these actions may in fact take place in groups created on instant messaging platforms such as whatsapp or

telegram, where all those who are part of them are known. Moreover, this is his way of showing off. An awareness arose about the origin of such behaviours, probably linked to family problems that have created insecurities in her and that are thus compensated for.

Table 5.

	N	%		N	%
<b>What does she fear?</b>			<b>What does attracts her?</b>		
Being excluded/hurt	386	41.6	Engaging in negative actions (aggressiveness)	209	22.5
Parents/institutions	224	24.2	Partner	303	32.7
Nothing	80	8.6	Nothing	17	1.8
Diversity	3	0.3	Power/wealth/fun	146	15.7
Not applicable	188	20.3	Not applicable	211	22.9
No response	46	5.0	No response	41	4.4
Total	927	100	Total	927	100

Table 6.

	N	%		N	%
<b>What life models is she inspired by?</b>			<b>What words does she predominantly use?</b>		
People/behaviors with negative traits	293	31.6	Insults/offenses/swear words	623	67.2
People/behaviors of wealth and popularity	317	34.2	Youth slang	153	16.5
Family/friends	39	4.2	I don't know	28	3.0
No life model	53	5.7	Not applicable	95	10.2
Not applicable	138	14.9	No response	25	2.7
No response	87	9.4			
Total	927	100	Total	927	100

## 4. Discussion

The study aims to understand the perspective of adolescents in order to define the profile of a girl who engages in cyberbullying behaviours. The emerging image is of a girl who conforms to stereotypical representations of women in society, such as a girl who loves dancing or is concerned about her diet and body image as well as to stereotypical representations of individuals involved in violent settings (Pasqui et al., 2019; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2019). However, during class discussions, participants revealed that cyberbullying girls may be any girl who eats, listens to music and has interests similar to her peers. These answers demonstrate a deeper understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon, as evidenced by their observations regarding the underlying causes of these negative behaviours, e.g. fear of being hurt. The results of this study are very similar to those of Saladino et al. (2020) and to Eisenberg et al. (1994) considerations about female aggression. Indeed, also these adolescents suggest that girls tend to act in a more indirect way and exercise a kind of psychological power in which popularity play a key role. However, although adolescents have developed a clear idea of what cyberbullies are like, they also exhibit some misunderstanding. Firstly, they tend to conflate bullies and cyberbullies, suggesting a strong link between online and offline life (i.e. onlife: Floridi, 2017). Secondly, adolescents tend to associate cyberbullying more with boys than with girls, suggesting that there may be a gender bias that can lead to certain behaviours or perpetrators being overlooked.

### 4.1. Strengths, limits and future directions

Among the strengths of the study is the use of open-ended questions and classroom discussions: this method allows for a broader range of responses than those anticipated by the research team and captures more precisely the participants' perspective on the topic. The classroom debate helped clarify responses and understand the motivations behind the answers collected. A limit of this study can be the difficulty on categorization of responses into labels. However, the internal team's discussion and evaluation to define sufficiently representative labels make the study's results valuable for achieving its intended goals. Future studies can explore the connections between the behaviours of girls who act as cyberbullies and family or relational problems (a critical factor identified by Song et al., 2020), as well as examine risk factors or effective interventions (Craig et al., 2019; Zsila et al., 2019).

## 5. Conclusions

This study explores female cyberbullying from an adolescent perspective, highlighting the often-overlooked role of female perpetrators. It reveals that the "cyberbullying girl" is a peer with typical interests, yet capable of subtle online aggression. Despite limitations, the study offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers, showing the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Future research should focus on motivations and prevention strategies, integrating these into school programs to reduce cyberbullying.

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